The Scandal of Palm Sunday
Matthew 21: 1-17
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The scandal of Palm Sunday is that on this day Christians come to church for the wrong reasons, in the same way that the followers of Jesus cheered and waved branches for wrong reasons. William Stringfellow observes that, "The disciples of Jesus Christ today keep returning to Palm Sunday, possessed with nostalgia for the parade." [Free in Obedience p. 37] It is called "the day of triumphal entry." The motif of the celebration has always been victory, - Jesus receiving the adulation and popular support he deserved. Christians, generally, feel pretty good about this day.

The scandal of Palm Sunday is that everyone was wrong about Jesus Christ. He was thinking one thing: his friends and followers another: the priests and scribes still another. And because of that the day ended quite differently from the way it began. When it was all over he was alone, and quietly left the city he had entered several hours before.

Palm Sunday, properly understood, separates the men from the boys. It draws the whole created order, men and their institutions, into confrontation with Jesus Christ. It revealed him for who he really was, not who men wanted him to be; and by inference it reveals what the Gospel really is, not what we wish it to be. The scandal is that when it happened 2,000 years ago the machinery was set in motion which brought about his crucifixion five short days later. The scandal is that Palm Sunday is not really a day of triumph at all. It is a prelude to crucifixion.

So let's forget about all those Sunday School pictures of the day's events: let's lay aside the comfortable myth that Jesus was "King for a day", and look at the meanings of the event that aren't talked about much.

The ancient historian Josephus calculated that about 2.7 million Jews came to Jerusalem from all over the world for the passover celebration. Now, that's a lot of people - a lot of "outsider, tourist types" inclined to do the kinds of things country cousins do on a big week in the city. There are two things to remember

about those people. First, they were there to celebrate the Passover, that event in their early history which resulted in their liberation from political servitude. The angel of the Lord, you will recall, "passed-over" their homes while visiting death on the Egyptians. Herod relented from his obstenancy long enough for them to pack up and leave Egypt. It was a "freedom festival". The Passover marked the event in their past that transformed them from a group of hapless slaves, into a nation, a people - the Covenant People of God. That's the first thing to remember. 2.7 million Jews were in the capital of their nation, the cite of the Temple, to celebrate their independence as a nation, their special identity as a people.

The second thing to remember is that they weren't a nation at all. They were a Roman province. The law enforcement officers were Roman legionnaires. Rome called the shots in Jerusalem and the Roman presence contradicted everything the Passover meant. It denied history: it was a rude, insulting slap in the face for every Jew. And so the burden of Roman occupation had given birth to a new wave of hope regarding the Messiah. Now was the time for God to act. Now was the time for the redeemer to come and throw off the yoke of Rome. Those two things then - 2.7 million pilgrims engaging in patriotic celebration under the heel of political oppression - made Jerusalem a "tinderbox" ripe for revolt and revolution. It was a little like going to Washington to celebrate the 4th of July if this nation were a satelite of the Soviet Union. That's the stage for Palm Sunday, one of the givens as Jesus made his decision to enter the city.

He had a plan, there can be no doubt about that. He had arranged for the donkey ahead of time. All his disciples had to do was pick it up and use the prearranged "pass word" - "the Lord has need of it." He had thought about it and come to the hard decision to enter the Holy City on the first day of the Passover. He had deliberately chosen to ride a donkey, the beast Kings rode when they came in peace. He carefully chose to fulfill one of the more graphic and popular messianic predictions in the Scriptures: "Lo your King comes to you - riding on an ass." He was courageous, but it was a strange and terrible kind of courage. Bravery in the crisis of battle is one thing. Calculated, planned courage is another thing

altogether. Jesus had decided to come to Jerusalem, in this specific way, for a specific reason. He knew exactly how he would be received. He knew what was going to happen.

We can only speculate about his disciples. The New Testament tells us that they were"afraid and amazed" when he made the decision to go to Jerusalem. They were practical men: they knew the risks: they saw clearly that the best strategy would have been to stay in Galilea: or at least to slip into the city anonymously as part of the crowd. In their hearts they hoped that he would be King. If he insisted on going they would follow, hoping that finally he would make the right move and claim his Kingdom. But they were afraid - in the presence of this terrible courage.

So they came from Bethany, Jesus riding on an ass, they following behind. The predictable happened. The crowd recognized him: the crowd - the rabble, the country people who had seen him in Galelia, the poor, the sick, the sinners. Not the suave, urbane Jerusalemites. The crowd - the volatile mass of country people who had glutted the city. They recognized him - and knew immediately that he was coming in the way the scriptures had promised. And so they tore the shirts from their backs and the branches from the trees and welcomed him as only an oppressed people welcome their liberator.

The parade now had become a mob. It moved slowly through the crowded streets and stopped at the Temple. He got off his beast and walked into the outer court. There he saw something that resembled a carnival - a giant, vulgar bazaar. Here were money changers, who for a fee would exchange a man's coins into sheckels - the only money with which a man could buy sacrificial animals. Over there were the animal inspectors who, for a fee, checked the animals a man brought from home - or purchased outside - for blemishes and imperfections. There were the pigeons and doves and lambs which the temple authorities had for sale. More expensive than those outside, naturally, but pre-checked for blemishes. It was, of course, nothing more than extortion. And as the noisy mob watched in amazement he fashioned a whip and turned over the tables and drove out the merchants. It was something

everyone of them had wanted to do. Now we have a yelling mob, and animals running loose, and coins spilling on the ground, and greedy men scurrying around after them dodging the lashes of his whip.

When the dust settled the poor and sick and lame came to him - there in that dirty, dusty but now quiet courtyard. And after them a very official-looking delegation of priests and scribes. It boggles the mind to contemplate their rage and fear. In a study of disciplined understatement they asked him a rhetorical question: "Do you see what you have done?" Poor men! O course, he saw. They were the ones who didn't.

Then he left - leaving them to their frustrated rage - which would quickly conceive the plan of execution: leaving the crowd which thought it had a King - now disappointed.

That's the story which the glossy pictures don't quite convey, and I always feel that it bears retelling on this day. But what does it mean? What does it say to those who would celebrate Palm Sunday today?

I would have us think, first of all, about the fact that Jesus came to Jerusalem deliberately to confront the power structures of society; that he consciously set out to claim his Lordship in the symbolic and literal center of his people's life. He had spent three years in Galilea, in the country, in the pleasant, rolling hills of Judea. There had always been conflict and the possibility of trouble, to be sure. But, by and large, these were his kind of people: among them he had a large following. They listened to his teaching and marveled at his power. But the Galilean ministry was on the periphery. The city has always been where the action is. The city is where power is lodged and decisions are made. The city had the courts and the Temple with its hierarchy. The city is where money was made and spent. It was the heart of the nation's life. Jesus, simply stated, was not content to be a peripheral Lord. Sooner or later his Lordship would have to be validated or rejected, right at the center of things.

That speaks a rather unmistakable word about the Gospel and the world, especially to those who are enamoured with the old litany that religion and politics,

religion and economics, don't mix. That speaks a crystal clear word to those who see no connection between religious affirmations about the Fatherhood of God and political behavior which denies the brotherhood of all men.

You see, when Jesus made that fateful decision to come to Jerusalem he confronted - not only individual men, but their institutions. He confronted, not only individual Jews, but also the institution of Judaism - the Temple, the sacrificial system and its rotten economic base, the court system. That's really what got him crucified. It's rather harmless to be a Christ in Galilea: it's something altogether to believe in Jesus Christ tomorrow when life resumes - in education, in business, in City Hall, the Court House, the banks, real estate offices and so on. Being a Christian there - affirming the Lordship of Jesus Christ there just may get a man crucified.

Because Jesus Christ came to the city, with all that entails, Christian people are called to be involved, to be in the symbolic cities, the places of power and decision making, not just as interested taxpayers, but specifically as disciples of Jesus. Because of what he did, our orders are to be there too - in this city in this day.

That's the scandal. We don't want that. We prefer the safety of that old hoax about separating our theology from our public life. We prefer to be Galilea Christians, keeping our convictions on the safe periphery, far removed from things like the welfare system and the housing code and the Human Relations Commission. Well, the scandal of Palm Sunday is that it isn't possible. The Lordship of Jesus Christ is meaningful in the city - or it is not meaningful at all.

You know - within each one of us there is a Galilea and a Jerusalem. There is a periphery in our lives, and there is a heart, a center, when we make our important decisions, hold our deepest convictions, nurture our fondest dreams and feel our greatest loves. And, you know, there is a lot about our religiosity which deposits it out there in the outer circle, on the periphery, in Galilea. Again, the scandal of this day is that Jesus Christ rides right out of Galilea and into Jerusalem: right out of that Sundaymmorning, 11:00 - 12:00 slot and into the center

of our lives, where we are who we are. There he clamis Lordship - over us, over our hearts, over our dreams, loves, prejudices, values, motivations. The scandal of this day is that you and I end up on the spot. What are we going to do with him? He won't go back to the periphery. He confronts us on this day and we have to respond.

There is great wisdom in the old Catholic custom of giving each worshipper a palm branch on this day. The branches are kept through the year and burned prior to Lent. Then on Ash Wednesday, the ashes from those branches are used to mark the sign of the cross on the forheads of the devout. It is a mark of contrition and penatence. It says what needs to be said on this day. We are involved in the scandal. We are part of the crowd: part of the religious establishment: we are those who want him on the peripheries of life. We are those who need, on this day, the grace of his forgiveness.

On this day our Lord Jesus Christ rode into Jerusalem. On this day, let us remember that he rides into the center of our lives and claims his Lordship there. May our "Hosanna's" mark our simple acceptance of that Lordship.

Amen.

Help us, our Father, to see the terrible significance of this day. Keep us from disguising the issues involved in Christ's coming to Jerusalem. Open our hearts and lives to his Lordship.

Amen.